

VIEWS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS:

PROGRAMME FOR FINLAND'S PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

REPORT BY A WORKING PARTY OF THE PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS

17. lokakuuta 2018

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PROGRAMME FOR FINLAND'S PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

Introduction

At the initiative of Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and Representative Arto Satonen, the chairperson of the Grand Committee, the parliamentary groups appointed a working group with the task of assigning topics as the nationally significant EU policy priority areas for the programme of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU (1 July–31 December 2019). The final programme for the presidency will be prepared by the Government that will be formed after the parliamentary elections of April 2019.

The presidency of the EU Council offers Finland the opportunity to bring up topics with national or local significance. The topics may be included in the objectives of the entire EU later on, as was the case with the Northern Dimension policy advocated by Finland.

According to the working group's suggestion, the three focus areas of Finland's EU Council presidency are

- 1) Focus on the citizens
- 2) Take charge of climate policy
- 3) A stronger Europe, a safer world

The parliamentary groups appointed the following persons to the working group: Arto Satonen (National Coalition Party, chairperson), Sirkka-Liisa Anttila (Centre Party), Paavo Arhinmäki (Left Alliance), Eva Biaudet (Swedish People's Party), Simon Elo (Blue Reform), Sari Essayah (Christian Democratic Party), Pekka Haavisto (Greens), Timo Harakka (Social Democratic Party), Jani Mäkelä (Finns Party), Sari Raassina (National Coalition Party), Mikko Savola (Centre Party) and Tytti Tuppurainen (Social Democratic party)¹.

The working group notes that the report is an initial survey of the potential topics for the agenda of the presidency. The report is not meant to steer the actions of the Parliament to be elected next year, nor those of the next Government. The is a compilation of the working group's discussions and does not necessarily represent the views of all parliamentary groups.

¹ When members of the working group were prevented from attending, they were replaced by the following substitutes: Olavi Ala-Nissilä and Arto Pirttilahti (Centre Party), Thomas Blomqvist and Anna-Maja Henriksson (Swedish People's Party), Kimmo Kivelä (Blue Reform), Laura Huhtasaari (Finns Party), Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democratic Party) and Hanna Sarkkinen (Left Alliance).

VALUES AND FOCAL ISSUES OF FINLAND'S PRESIDENCY

In terms of setting policy goals, Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU takes place at an important time right after the European elections. The European elections will be followed by the elections of the President of the European Council and the European Commission. The newly formed institutions will decide the objectives that will guide the EU's operations until the next elections in 2024. As the holder of the Council's presidency, Finland has the opportunity and duty to participate actively in determining the policy objectives for the next electoral term.

A values-based Presidency

During its Presidency and when representing the Member States towards third countries, Finland shall emphasise the shared basic values that the EU was founded to protect. This includes defending universal and fundamental human rights and, in particular, promoting gender equality in all policy sectors. The unity of the EU can be promoted by applying a citizen's perspective to all EU decision-making. During its Presidency, Finland wishes by all its policy actions to promote a more democratic and citizen-oriented EU. In the EU's external relations, Finland represents the values of a rules-based, multilateral state system, and thus, it supports the EU's strong and active participation in all international arenas. As the Presidency of the Council of the EU, Finland represents the Member States' commitment to the ideals and obligations of a free, democratic state subject to the rule of law.

A political programme for the presidency

In the view of the working party, the programme of Finland's presidency must be, above all, a statement of political objectives. Its purpose is to support the EU's ability to respond in unison to current and future European and global challenges. Thus, the setting of political objectives has priority in Finland's programme.

The substance of the presidency will be affected by external factors such as the implementation of Brexit and the convergence of the Western Balkan countries. Developments in the Middle East, Turkey and North Africa may also be reflected in the EU's internal policies.

The working group notes that matters left over from previous presidencies form an important part of the presidency's agenda. At the beginning of the autumn term of 2018, most of the proposals in the Juncker Commission's ten priorities legislative programme were still being processed by the EU's institutions or had not even been presented². The

parliamentary groups have expressed their views on the Commission's proposals³ during the parliamentary process.

Focus on the citizens

Economic policy that benefits citizens

In the eyes of the citizens, the legitimacy of the European Union is connected to the success of the EU's economic policy. The basic expectations the citizens have for the EU are a stable, sustainable economy, employment, and purchasing power. We must pay particular attention to the situation of young people, education opportunities and preventing youth unemployment. If we are to recover from the devastation of a decade wasted on economic crises, we have to focus on the preconditions for growth: a functioning internal market, digitalisation, AI, platform economy, innovations, strategic initiatives and their funding, as well as the removing unnecessary regulation. Finland stresses the obligation of each Member State to comply with the Stability and Growth Pact and bear responsibility for its own economy.

Prosperity through skills

The EU's long-standing commitment to spend more on training, skills and research must be implemented. Finland's established reputation as a leader in education and skills creates expectations for a presidency programme that promotes competence and education. Equal education opportunities for all should be viewed as an issue of not only equality and equal treatment, but also as a matter of Europe's competitiveness.

Make Social Europe a Reality

The EU's cohesion, i.e. its citizens' ownership of the benefits of the Union, can be promoted by improving and concretising the EU's social dimension. The EU's multiannual financial framework allows for the design of indicators that promote social cohesion and the Union's fundamental values, while respecting Member States' competence in social policy.

² A summary of the status of Juncker's Commission's ten priorities on 1 August 2018 can be found at [http://www.europa.eu/regdata/etudes/STUD/2018/625176/EPRS_STU\(2018\)625176_EN.pdf](http://www.europa.eu/regdata/etudes/STUD/2018/625176/EPRS_STU(2018)625176_EN.pdf)

³ The priorities of the Commission are A new boost for jobs, growth and investment; A connected digital single market; A resilient energy union with a forward-looking climate change policy; A deeper and fairer internal market; A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union; A balanced and progressive trade policy to harness globalisation; An area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust; Towards a new policy on migration; A stronger global actor; and A union of democratic change.

Tax avoidance has no place in Europe

Tax evasion and tax avoidance offend people's sense of justice, and combatting these evils reinforces public trust in the EU. Removing tax evasion and avoidance, as well as harmful tax competition, are also preconditions for developing a social Europe.

A safe Europe

The EU increases citizens' net security, which is important to Finland. Responding to climate change is an important security issue. Internal and border security issues will remain high on the EU's agenda. The status of women and children should be approached not only as an equality issue, but also as a question of internal security. Violence against women, the exploitation of vulnerable groups and human trafficking cannot be tolerated in Europe. The battle against social inequality and exclusion is crucial for social stability in Europe and must be made a stronger political priority in the EU.

A successful common immigration policy is extremely important to the EU. The abolition of border controls between Member States – a fundamental EU policy – may become unsustainable, unless the Union can agree on an immigration policy that respects fundamental and human rights and is acceptable to citizens. Immigration policy must prevent migrant smuggling and human trafficking, for instance, by creating legal routes for immigration.

Take charge of climate policy

In 2018, the entire European Union suffered from exceptional and extreme weather conditions. The extreme weather phenomena have further convinced the Member States that a change in climate policy is unavoidable. Mitigating and adaptation to climate change affect most EU policy sectors. Finland's aim is to have the climate impact of all EU policies assessed and for the emission targets of every policy sector to be updated in accordance with the Paris climate agreement.

Sustainability in the basics: Food, water and forests

Climate change will affect the conditions of food production globally. In the EU area, climate change creates both challenges and opportunities for agriculture. Desertification will increase the relative productivity and value of cultivable land. As a result, the economic importance of rural production will increase. During its presidency, Finland shall promote increased agricultural profitability and a more long-term rural policy that can more efficiently manage the challenges of climate change and support biodiversity. Fields that act as carbon sinks play an important part in managing climate change.

In addition to food, the strategic and economic value of clean water, sustainable forestry and clean energy will increase. Forests are closely linked with several of the EU's policies, for example as carbon sinks that contain climate change and as a sustainable alternative to fossil fuels and plastics, as well as maintaining biodiversity. Finland's competence in

forestry and forest technology allows us to contribute to the EU's economic development through new, bio-based products, thus supporting sustainable development policies. A forest industry that uses wood in a sustainable and diverse manner is one of the cornerstones of the Finnish welfare state. It also forms a significant portion of Finland's export yield.

Implementing a bioeconomy and a circular economy

All economic activities must be guided by the concept of a circular economy. Promoting bioeconomy and circular economy ambitiously plays a part in combatting climate change, ending the overconsumption of natural resources, solving the waste crisis both in the oceans and on land, as well as promoting the goals of growth and increased employment. A circular economy with its technological applications (cleantech, bioeconomy) are important to Finland's future prosperity. Promoting a circular economy offers benefits on the national, the EU and the global level, and thus, it is one of Finland's primary objectives for the EU's policies.

A stronger Europe – a safer world

External relations and EU's relations to adjacent areas significantly determine the substance of many of the EU's policies. In reality, states, citizens and economic actors interact via numerous links across the borders of nation-states, which must also be taken into account in the objectives of Finland's Presidency programme. The commitment of EU Member States to the Agenda 2030 programme means that the programme will affect EU decision making in all policy sectors.

Previously set targets concerning permanent structural cooperation, the defence fund and military mobility will be reflected in the agendas of several Councils. For Finland, it seems only natural to assume that European defence cooperation will be developed and deepened. Preparations to counter different types of hybrid threats will remain an important priority. In addition, the EU's capacity for solving crises peacefully, supporting peace processes and crisis management must be improved.

Arctic policy – a new future

EU's Arctic policy must become more proactive. Climate change, the vulnerability of the Arctic environment, the rights of indigenous peoples, the military-strategic importance of the Arctic region, and the opening of new transport routes form a whole that requires the EU to adopt a more active Arctic policy. For Finland, the development of Arctic cooperation is an environmental question and a source of new economic opportunities for our Arctic expertise and advanced technology.

Many climate policy challenges are also related to Arctic policy. The challenges concern the melting of polar ice sheets, black carbon deposits in polar regions and adjusting environmental standards to the particularly vulnerable environmental conditions of Arctic areas. The inclusion of indigenous peoples in the future development of their own habitat, culture and livelihood must be ensured.

The impacts of climate change and technological developments mean that the Northeast Passage already offers a viable trade route, and that it will soon be possible to utilise the natural resources on the northern edge of Eurasia more effectively than before. Due to this development, the EU has significant interests to guard with regards to, for example, a sustainable economy.

The Northern Dimension, a policy launched during Finland's first EU Presidency and conceived as an equal partnership, leaving the specifics of cooperation to be decided at the sector level, offers an example of pragmatic organisation of Arctic cooperation.

Participation in an Arctic partnership means that the EU must make significant investments in the infrastructure of northern regions and the North Calotte by, for example, extending the Trans-European Transport Networks. Gradually implementing northern network investments, first up to Tornio and later to the coast of the Arctic Ocean and towards the Kola Peninsula, is critical to Finland, and thus, these issues must be at the heart of our objectives in the EU.

For Finland, the Baltic Sea is an essential transport route to Europe and the rest of the world, but its large pollution load also creates a major challenge to our environmental policy. During its Presidency, Finland seeks to promote cooperation on the reduction of the sea's environmental load among both EU Member States and all coastal countries.

Stability through trade and development

The future of regulated world trade will be one of the key issues during the Presidency. At the same time, the question of how trade regulations affect global economic growth and development is becoming more and more topical. Finland's EU objectives must be developed in line with the objectives for the Agenda 2030 programme.

For Europe, developing economic relations between the EU and Africa towards a cooperation of equals is simultaneously a question of survival and an opportunity for new growth in partnership with a prospering Africa. Europe must do what it can to ensure that the upcoming generations in Africa can believe in a good future in their own continent. Key measures include ensuring education and employment for young people and paying particular attention to the status of women and girls. In the end, promoting Africa's development and economic growth may be the only effective way to address the primary cause of migration.

Background: Duties of the Presidency and its programme

According to the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council, which is composed of the heads of State or Government of the EU Member States, the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission, “provides the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and defines the general political directions and priorities thereof”⁴. Since 2014, the European Council has agreed that its work will be guided by priority areas specified for a period of five years. The next strategic programme will be decided after the election of the next President of the European Council in June 2019.

According to the Basic Treaty, the European Commission has, with rare exceptions, a monopoly on proposing acts to be adopted through the EU legislative procedure. The Commission’s work programme for its term of office will be adopted once the new Commission has been appointed after the European elections in 2019.

The Council of the EU is chaired by – with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council, which is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – representatives of the Member States, each for a period of six months at a time. The duties of the Presidency are related to its status as the chair of the different configurations of the Council. The Presidency decides the agenda in its programme in accordance with the guidelines set by the European Council and the Commission’s initiatives. The Presidency represents the Council in the trilogue process. The Presidency represents the Council in the EU’s internal administration.

The Presidency’s significance to Finland is related to the influence it grants. Successfully promoting the EU’s joint agenda and acting as a mediator in disputes between the Member States increases the Presidency’s influence. During its term, the Presidency collects valuable information on the goals of the EU and its various Member States. Above all, the programme of the Presidency offers an opportunity to bring the Council’s attention to nationally or locally important topics, which may later be included in the objectives of the entire EU, as was the case with the Northern Dimension policy advocated by Finland.

Finland will form a Trio with the previous Presidency, Romania, and the next Presidency, Croatia. Their joint agenda will be adopted in December 2018 on the basis of the European Council’s strategic programme 2014–2019.

⁴ Treaty of European Union, Article 15